

Singer For Famine Relief

1. The Shallow Pond: Here's a story:

Shallow Pond Every day, while walking to work you pass a shallow pond, just deep enough so that a child could not touch the bottom. Today, there is a child drowning in that pond. No one else is around. You know that, if you don't jump in to save him, the child will die. Unfortunately, you are wearing a brand new \$200 pair of pants, and you do not have time to take them off before jumping into the muddy pond, which will ruin the pants. So, not wanting to ruin your pants, you continue on to work. You hear the child gurgling behind you as he finally sinks beneath the surface and dies.

Now ask: Is failing to save the drowning child **morally wrong**? Most would agree that you are a moral monster for letting the child drown in this case. Note what this means: Most think that you ought to sacrifice your \$200 clothing in order to save the child.

But, now consider this fact: **Every year, 5.3 million children under the age of 5 die** of easily preventable, poverty-related causes: They die by starving to death, or dying of thirst, or from starvation-related illness and disease—all of which are easily treatable. That's over 14,500 each day ; 605 each hour ; or 1 death every 6 seconds. ([source](#))

Meanwhile, **the richest 1% owns HALF of the entire world's wealth** ([source](#)), with the 26 richest individuals owning more than the bottom 50% of human beings—i.e., 3.8 billion people—combined ([source](#)). You qualify as a top 1-percenter if your net worth is \$871,320 or more. (Over 1 in 7 Americans is a top 1-percenter). And a mere \$93,170 in assets makes you a global top 10-percenter. (HALF of all Americans are top 10%-ers.) ([source](#); [source](#)) We spend thousands of dollars each year on luxuries. We buy iphones, laptops, giant televisions, expensive cars, expensive clothing, expensive meals... all while children starve to death. Are your shoes worth more than someone's LIFE?

Peter Singer believes that failing to help starving children is no different, morally, from failing to help the drowning child in the shallow pond. Consider: In Shallow Pond, you have the ability to easily prevent a child's death, though doing so will cost a luxury item. But, by donating around \$200 to famine relief, you could prevent one child from dying of poverty-related causes. Singer's argument is something like this:

Singer's Argument by Analogy for Famine Relief

1. Not saving the child in the Shallow Pond case is seriously morally wrong.
2. But, failing to donate to famine relief to save children who are dying due to starvation is morally analogous to not saving the drowning child.
3. Therefore, failing to donate to famine relief is also seriously morally wrong.

2. Singer's Principle: But, why is it wrong to save the drowning child? Peter Singer offers a moral principle to support this verdict:

Singer's Principle: If we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought to do so.

In Shallow Pond: Since a pair of pants is not of comparable moral importance to the life of a child, you ought to sacrifice them in order to prevent the death of the child.

However, this principle entails a lot more than that: For, we can all prevent something very bad from happening (namely, the deaths of starving children) without significant sacrifice (roughly \$200 of donations saves a life).¹ Therefore, we ought to do so:

Singer's Principled Argument for Famine Relief

1. If we can prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought to do so.
2. We can prevent something very bad (namely, death due to starvation and poverty-related causes) without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance (namely, by donating roughly \$200 to famine relief).
3. Therefore, we ought to donate to famine relief.

Objection: Some have suggested that Singer's principle (in premise 1) is actually false. If true, then it would be **way too demanding!** For, after donating your FIRST \$200, it would STILL be the case that you could prevent something very bad without sacrificing something of comparable significance—namely, ANOTHER \$200 to save another life. And then ANOTHER \$200, and ANOTHER, and so on...

Only once you too are impoverished and on the brink of starvation yourself would the principle no longer entail that you are obligated to keep donating (for then, if donating endangered YOUR life, it would now be a "comparable" sacrifice, and so not obligatory).

[Alternatively, consider the fact that many of us can save someone's life by donating our spare kidney to them. This is an instance of preventing something very bad without sacrificing something of comparable importance. So, am I morally obligated to donate one of my kidneys? Intuitively, most would say I am NOT obligated to do this.

...Or, is there some way to argue that donating a kidney IS comparable to a life?]

¹ More specifically, \$200 is enough to get a child through the critical early years, to age five. The vast majority of poverty-related death happens to children under five (and especially, infants less than one year old). From birth to age five, a child's chances of poverty-related death decreases dramatically, by more than 10-fold.

Reply: First, note that, if you reduce yourself to the brink of starvation, you will likely never graduate, or get a good job, where you might generate a large income. So, the BEST option would be to STAY in school, get the highest-paying job you can, and then spend your whole life donating as much as you can. If that's right, then the principle does NOT entail that you should reduce yourself to starvation.

Second, if this sounds too demanding, we might ask: Why on Earth should we think that morality should not be very demanding? Perhaps, it is very DIFFICULT—even bordering on IMPOSSIBLE—to live perfectly, always doing the morally right thing your entire life.

Third, if you're still unsatisfied, Singer suggests removing the word 'comparable' from his principle, and adopting this one instead:

Singer's Weaker Principle: If we can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing anything of moral importance, then we ought to do so.

[Note: While perhaps a kidney is of SOME moral importance—as are clothing, shelter, a college education, and so on—likely so-called “luxury” items are not really of any moral importance. And this would include things like that \$7 Starbucks drink, eating out at a restaurant, upgrading to the latest iphone, going to the movies, and so on... In fact, a full ONE THIRD of Americans' income is spent on luxury items. If “luxury” items fall under the category of “not morally important”, then even this weakened principle would still be quite demanding!]

3. Objections to the Shallow Pond Analogy: Let's return to the Pond argument. If we think it is wrong to ignore the drowning child, but permissible to ignore starving children, we will need to find some morally relevant difference between these two cases. Let's look at some potential differences between them.

1. Proximity: You are in close proximity to the child in Shallow Pond, but starving children are really far away.

Reply: Imagine that you happen upon the video feed of a security camera on the other side of the world, and see a child drowning on your monitor. Imagine further that you can press a button that will save him. It seems that you would STILL be a moral monster for not pushing the button. Physical proximity is not morally relevant.

2. Uncertainty: In Shallow Pond, you are certain that your effort saves the child, but we are uncertain whether our donations will ever get to the people in need.

Reply: This is simply false. You can do the research and find out which organizations ARE known for being successful and efficient. Start here: www.charitynavigator.org or www.givewell.org/ Singer also suggests two reliable charities: Oxfam and Unicef.

But, even if there WAS uncertainty, imagine there is only a 50% chance that jumping in to save the drowning child will succeed. You'd still be a moral monster if you decided not to jump in and at least TRY to save the child. Uncertainty is not morally relevant.

3. Others Can Help: In Shallow Pond, you are the ONLY one that can save the child, but there are LOTS of other people besides me that can help the starving children.

Reply: The fact that other people are doing bad things does not make it ok for US to do bad things. Imagine that, as you pass the pond, there are 100 other people picnicking and hanging out around the pond. You see the child drowning, but no one is doing anything about it. No one jumps in to save him. Would this fact make it ok for you to ALSO do nothing? No. It seems that those people are all moral monsters, and that you would be just as bad as them for not jumping in to save the child. The presence of others is not morally relevant.

4. The Size of the Problem: In Shallow Pond, if you save the child, the WHOLE problem will be solved. But, if I save one starving child today, there are still 12,999 other children who will die of starvation on this day. The starvation problem is simply too enormous.

Reply: The fact that no single person can solve the entire problem of famine is morally irrelevant. We are still morally obligated to do whatever we can. For instance, imagine that as you passed by the Shallow Pond, there were one THOUSAND drowning children. You then think to yourself, "If I jump in and save one, there will still be 999 other children drowning. MAYBE I'll have enough time to save 2 or even 3 children. But, the rest of the children will still die." Would this make it morally permissible to ignore the entire situation and continue on your way without doing ANYTHING? Probably not. Our ethical intuition here is most likely such that we are morally obligated to jump into the pond and save as many children as we can, even though we know that there is no way for us (a single person) to save ALL of them.